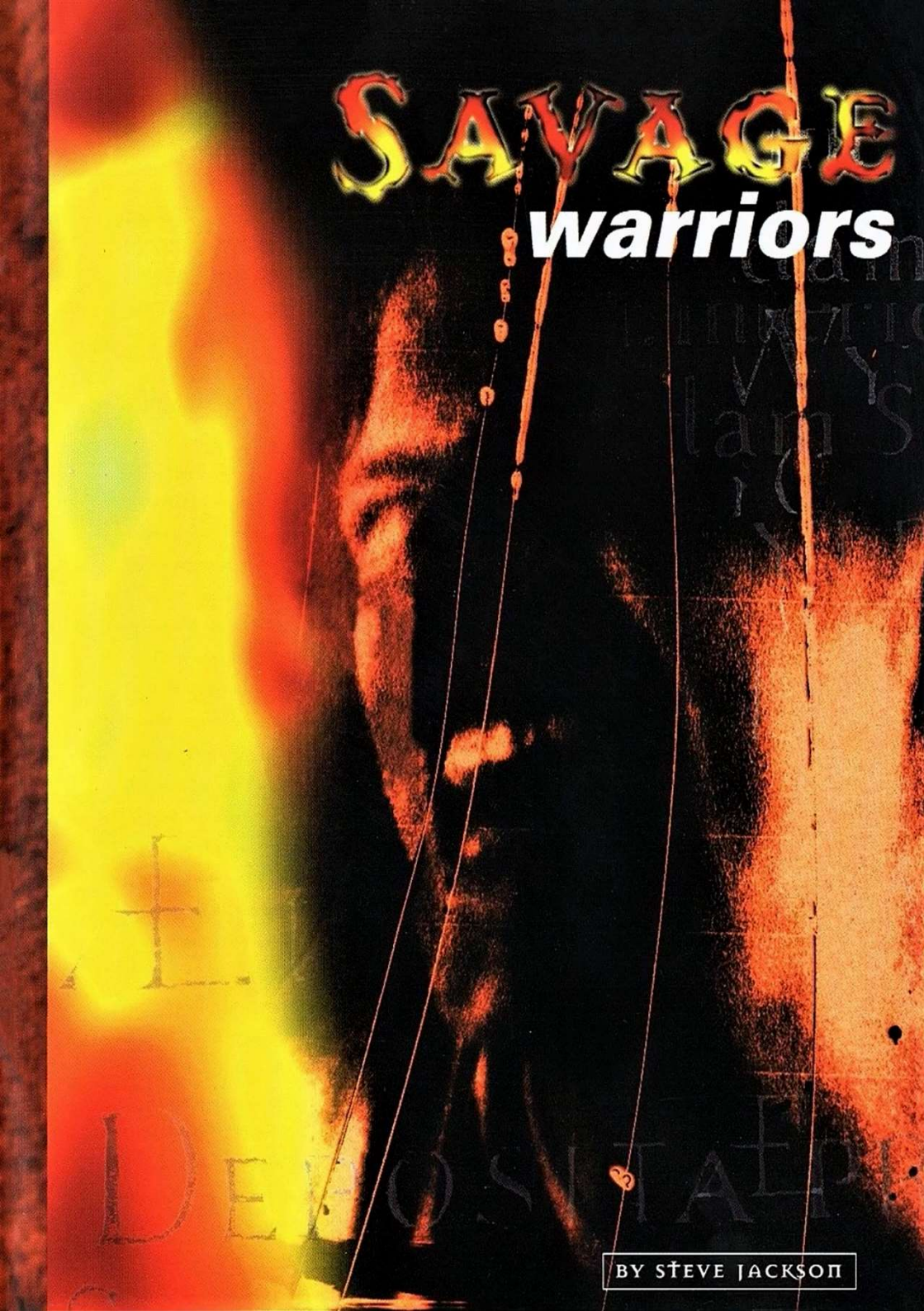
SAVAGE
warriors
BY STEVE JACKSON

Preface

Savage warriors!
Incredible wealth!
Mystical treasures!
Secrecy, intrigue, and sorcery.

This is the fascinating story of the Knights Templar.

Though it may read like a tale from the Arthurian legends, this story is no fantasy. *The Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon* - the Knights Templar for short - actually existed. Over a period of 200 years, what began as a 9-man team of well-intentioned noblemen dedicated to defending the Holy Land from the Saracens became the most powerful - and most secretive - organisation in history.

Their story is one of puzzling contrasts. In spite of devout Christian beliefs, they slaughtered men, women and children in the name of God. These warrior monks owned many fabled religious treasures including, it is said, the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus as he perished on the Cross. They were also thought to be the guardians of that most revered of all Christian relics, the Holy Grail.

The Templars possessed immeasurable wealth. Kings of Europe came to them cap in hand to negotiate loans. They created many fundamental aspects of today's international banking system like the bank note and letters of credit. Yet faithful to their solemnly sworn vows of poverty, the individual members of this secret society were penniless.

But when the Knights Templar was destroyed in the 14th century, their incredible riches vanished into thin air. To escape persecution by King Philip of France, the Templars' treasure - and their enormous fleet moored at La Rochelle - simply disappeared. To this day, its whereabouts has never been discovered.

History books also describe how the Templars were in possession of a mysterious "great secret". Some historians have suggested this merely related to their connection with the Grail. But more recent accounts have painted a different picture. This "great secret" may have been a particular knowledge which, if revealed, would undermine our fundamental view of Christianity itself.

Equally mysterious are accounts claiming that the organisation never really died at all. The end of the Templars was signified by the execution of their last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, who was roasted alive before a chanting mob in Paris in 1314. But some historians believe they simply changed their name and went underground. Evidence has even been cited which links famous figures from more recent history with the Order - hundreds of years after it officially ceased to be. Sir Isaac Newton is named as one. The great explorer Vasco de Gama journeyed with the Templar cross insignia on his sails, as did Christopher Columbus. Evidence even suggests that the Templars discovered America some 80 years before Columbus.

There are those who maintain that the Order of the Knights Templar are still in existence today, though under another name. Throughout Europe, its members are still thought to meet secretly to discuss unknown business, conduct arcane rituals and plot our destiny behind closed doors.

Chapter One

The First Crusade

Tracing the remarkable story of the Knights Templar takes us back on a journey through history to 11th century Europe and the time of the Crusades.
At that time, what we now know as the countries of Europe had not yet emerged. The continent was a patchwork of smaller kingdoms, each with its own ruling house. Many of the continual disputes between rulers were settled by petty wars. It was not a great place to live. Especially if you happened to a peasant.

Yet the people were all united by a common religion: Christianity. Everyone, from the nobles in their castles to the peasants in their shacks, conformed to the daily, weekly and yearly round of worship. The Pope, being the head of the church was God's representative on earth. He had enough worldly power to challenge emperors. The Pope's word was law. And the Pope's word could reach the smallest village in far-off rural Britain, through a vast network of priests. For centuries a succession of Popes had been fighting a war of words with the royal houses of Europe in an attempt to create a unified Christian Empire.

By 1095 the fierce Seljuk Turks, nomadic warriors who had recently converted to Islam, had advanced cast and established their own capital within 100 miles of Byzantium (also known as Constantinople, or Istanbul today), the capital of the Christian Eastern Roman Empire. Panic-stricken, Byzantium's Emperor Alexius sent a message to Pope Urban II, asking him for help.

Urban shared his predecessors' dream of a Christian kingdom extending from the Atlantic coast in the west to the Holy Land itself, all united under the Pope. Alexius' plea for help suited his purposes perfectly. Urban, however, was not content with the idea of just defending Byzantium. No, this ambitious Pope wanted to free the Holy City of Jerusalem itself, which had been occupied by the Moslems since the middle of the seventh century. Here was an opportunity to demonstrate his power over the rulers of Europe. Here was an opportunity to make a name for himself.

In an extraordinary bout of showmanship, Urban first toured the south and west of France himself, spreading the news of a great convention to be held in Clermont,

a town in central southern France. The meeting was attended by hundreds of clerics. On the final day, Urban rose to make a speech. Painting a dreadful picture of the cruelty of the Turks, he called for all Christians to forget their quarrels with fellow Christians, and put out an impassioned plea for a grand Crusade to liberate Jerusalem.

His call was rapidly carried across Europe by the Church network. In this way, the Pope bypassed the monarchs of the European countries and appealed directly to the nobles, and the common people under them. To those who saw war as an un-Christian act, Urban explained that the words of the bible had been 'misinterpreted'. Though the Sixth Commandment clearly stated, 'Thou shalt not kill', it was now only a sin to kill Christians. Killing Moslems was perfectly acceptable. Furthermore, Urban promised that anyone who died in battle would be forgiven all his sins in this life and the next - he would be guaranteed a ticket to heaven. But he also warned that anyone who turned back would be excommunicated for his cowardice.

Amongst the warmongering knights of Europe, many of whom were not particularly well off, the opportunity to plunder the rich cities of the east was irresistible. And with God's blessing too! From all corners, knights and peasants alike - often with entire families in tow - marched down across Europe towards Byzantium. The First Crusade was underway.

School textbooks paint a romantic picture of the First Crusade: knights in fine armour fighting the Arabs infidel in the name of God. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Arab world was relatively peaceful and civilised at the time. An Arab gentleman was expected to be a poet and philosopher as well as a warrior. They had correctly calculated the distance from the earth to the moon. And one Arab had even suggested that if you could split the atom, it would release enough power to destroy a city the size of Baghdad. Furthermore, Jerusalem itself was a multi-cultural city. Jews, Moslems and Christians all lived together harmoniously. Christians on pilgrimages to Jerusalem were freely allowed access to the Holy Places.

In contrast, the barbarian horde of Europeans descending on the Middle East was a mob of savages on the rampage. They burnt, looted, raped and pillaged their way down through Europe and the Balkans. First to arrive at Byzantium in answer to Alexius' call for help was a rabble of 15,000 vagabonds, led by a charismatic monk called Peter the Hermit.

The emperor was horrified. He had hoped for perhaps a couple of hundred armed knights from the Pope. He was certainly not going to let Peter and his unruly barbarians into his city. Following soon afterwards were thousands of Franks and Germanic peoples, including knights and their followers. Alexius ferried them all hastily across the Bosphorus into Turkey. He was glad to see the back of them.

When the Crusaders arrived in Northern Turkey, the carnage began. The town of Lycea was captured and looted. Reports told of babies cut to pieces. Old people were subjected to every kind of torture. Unfortunately, most of the inhabitants of Lycea were actually *Christians...*

The rampage continued southwards into the Holy Land. After engagements with the Turks the crusaders would return to camp with the heads of Moslems mounted on spears. On one occasion they even had Moslem prisoners of war carry the heads of slain colleagues themselves. 50 miles south of Antioch, when they captured the town of Marrat, the Crusaders even resorted to cannibalism. As Radulph of Caen, observed. "Our troops boiled pagan adults in cooking pots. They impaled children on spits and devoured them grilled." These were not the agents of God. They were no more than blood-lusting savages.

Eventually, in June of 1099, they reached Jerusalem, which they besieged and captured in July. First to set foot on the battlements of the Holy City were two Flemish brothers. For this they became legendary heroes. They were as famous as Neil Armstrong is today. The Crusaders wreaked dreadful carnage on the defenceless inhabitants, slaughtering Jews and Moslems in their places of worship. It was said that the blood ran so deep it came up to the ankles of the knights.

But the crusade was judged to have been an overwhelming success. The Holy City had been recaptured from the infidel.

Chapter Two

The Warrior Monks

When news of the crusaders' success filtered back to Europe, there was great rejoicing. From the far corners of the continent, pilgrims set off on their journeys to the Holy Land intent on seeing for themselves the city where so many episodes of Jesus' life had taken place. But these pilgrimages began to create considerable problems for the new rulers of *Outremer* - the French name given to this 'land across the sea'.

A Christian kingdom had been quickly established to encompass the territory conquered during in the First Crusade. But this did not bring peace to the region. The Christians were still surrounded by hostile Islamic states. The Turks and Moslems who had lost much of their land to the Christians were not about to simply give up and go away.

Within fifty years the Saracen Turks had rallied and made severe inroads on the new kingdom. There were continual raids and skirmishes on Christian settlements. Starry-eyed pilgrims travelling inland from the coast towards Jerusalem were particularly easy targets. In a single incident in 1119, for instance, a band of pilgrims was ambushed by marauding Saracens, and over 300 were killed. And in 1120, Saracen war-parties could be seen outside the walls of Jerusalem itself.

But by this time, many of the original crusading knights had returned with their plundered riches to Europe. Now that the Pope's mission to recapture the Holy City had been completed, their job was done. At home, their families were waiting to greet them as conquering heroes. This left a desperate shortage of skilled soldiers to defend the new settlers and their pilgrim visitors.

The stage was set for the emergence of the Warrior Monks.

Two new military orders arose within the Church, centred on Jerusalem. One of these was the Hospitallers - the Knights of St. John - whose original peaceful aim was to tend the sick and wounded in Outremer. Our present-day St. John's Ambulance service is directly descended from the Order of the Knights Hospitaller.

The considerably more dangerous task of protecting the pilgrims from Saracen raids was undertaken by Hugues de Payen, a French nobleman who had arrived with the First Crusade. In 1119, de Payen offered his humble services to the first King of Jerusalem, Baldwin I. He, along with eight of his fellow knights, would be willing to devote themselves to policing the pilgrim routes.

On the face of it, this was absurd. What chance had nine men against entire Saracen raiding parties? But evidently the nine did an extraordinarily good job. In fact, Baldwin was so impressed with their efforts that he gave the fledgling Order a wing of his own royal palace as their headquarters. In Moslem times, this wing had been the mosque of al-Aqsa. And this mosque had been built on a site once occupied by the Holy Temple of Solomon itself. Thus, it was that Hugues de Payen gave the new Order its name: the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon - *the Knights Templar.*

They were 'poor' knights, because they were also monks. They had taken the usual monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to their superior. They were often depicted in paintings of the time riding in pairs on a single horse. Whether they were actually this poor, or whether this simply represented their noble poverty, is unknown.

The heroic notion of nine brave warrior monks valiantly defending the travelling pilgrims against the Moslem raiders cannot fail to have captured people's imagination at the time. Today, the concept of men of God wielding bloody swords in battle is inconceivable. But in those days, set against a background of the crusaders' savage campaign to capture the Holy Land, it was perfectly acceptable. The terrible butchery inflicted on the Moslems during the crusade itself had, after all, been blessed by the Pope in the name of God.

Many began to regard the Templars with a romantic reverence and offered themselves as new recruits. The Order grew; slowly at first, then more rapidly. They trained as fighters, and became highly skilled warrior knights. Their activities also widened. From their original role protecting pilgrim parties, they gradually became regarded as the military defenders of the Holy Land.

The Order's founder and first Grand Master, Hugues de Payen, was evidently a man of remarkable abilities. From its humble beginnings, the Knights Templar under his leadership became a disciplined organisation of highly skilled professionals, with an efficient command structure. While the Order was small, all the Knights owed allegiance to a single Master. Later, further steps in the hierarchy were created, as roles became more specialised.

The Grand Master was responsible for the whole Order. Beneath him, separate Masters were appointed for each of the provinces in which the Templars were stationed. For every Knight out in the field, there were two or three sergeants serving alongside. These were men who had not yet made the same lifelong commitment to the Templar. They might be fighters - 'sergeants-at-arms' - or they might serve in a more peaceful way in some Templar house or convent.

In keeping with their commitment to poverty, the Knights wore simple clothing, which contrasted with the gaudy attire normal for knights in those days. They wore a plain white mantle - later adorned with the famous red Templar cross - to signify their purity and dedication. Out on campaign, the Templars on their war-horses wore chainmail armour. Their sergeants wore lighter armour and could fight on foot if need be.

At first the formation of the Knights Templar created no great stir. There was a tendency at the time for new Orders to come and go, according to the demands of the moment. But back home, the Knights Templar received the backing of the most powerful moral teacher in Europe at the time. This man was Bernard of Clairvaux. And Bernard's patronage and preaching led to their being fully constituted as an Order with the Pope's blessing in 1129. As a result, they soon became regarded throughout Europe as a new breed of hero.

And so, the Templar legend began.

Chapter Three

Meanwhile, back in Europe...

With the official blessing of the Pope, the Knights Templar could actively begin to recruit fresh members. And - more importantly - they could begin to raise money. Representatives of the Order were dispatched to Europe to campaign for donations to the cause. Little did they know just how easy this was going to be.

The exploits of the Templars had become famous throughout Europe. They were seen as noble warriors pledging themselves selflessly to defending the Holy Land from the hated Saracens. Yet these individuals were also humble and sincerely devoted to God.

So many others had used the crusade to line their own pockets. But these particular knights were sworn to vows of chastity and poverty. Their legendary bravery was typified in another vow - they were expressly forbidden to retreat from battle unless they were outnumbered by at least three to one.

In the relatively peaceful areas of central Europe, stories circulating about the Templars (no doubt greatly exaggerated during the long journey from Outremer) must have inspired a tremendous hero-worship for these romantic figures. When the people back home were asked to show their support for the Templars' cause, donations flooded in.

These donations were not the usual charitable offerings - a few coins here and there. The Templars were bequeathed fortunes, both in gold and also in land. Before long they had been given property in France, Spain, Portugal, and England, with scattered outposts also in Scotland, Austria, Hungary, Germany and northern Italy. Few were as generous as King Alfonso I of Aragon, who on his death in 1134 willed them a third of his kingdom in north-east Spain, which covered the modern Spanish regions of Aragon and Catalonia. Poorer people gave whatever they could afford.

Typically, though, grants were made by land-owning aristocrats. So - to take one example out of hundreds - in 1141 Conan, Duke of Brittany, gave the Order a small island off the Breton coast, and also a good yearly income from rents on his properties elsewhere in northern France.

Why were so many people prepared to give their money and property over to the new Order? Undoubtedly, charitable donations for religious purposes were seen as a way of gaining salvation after death - effectively buying a passage to heaven. But also, under the influence of powerful preachers like Bernard, the limited aims of the Order in the East were exaggerated until their role was seen as the defence of Christendom as a whole. People dug deep into their pockets. By the end of the twelfth century, William of Tyre wrote: 'There is now not a region in the Christian world which has not conferred a portion of its wealth on these brothers.'

All this hugely increased the numbers of the Templars. Not only did they need teams of knights and lesser brothers to look after their houses in Europe, but over 300 new Knights went out to the Middle East in the late 1120s. And after that there was always a steady stream. Moreover, their position was vastly strengthened in 1139 when Pope Innocent freed them from loyalty to any temporal ruler. Henceforth they were answerable only to the Pope himself. None save the Pope was their master.

As may be expected with such accumulation of wealth and power, the new Order did have its critics. Accountable to none, they were often accused of arrogance. And their affairs, conducted in secret, made some deeply suspicious of their activities. Many religious figures disapproved of their role as warriors of Christ. What could be less Christian than slaughtering human beings in battle, or looting cities? Persistent rumours also spread claiming that the actual work of the Knights Templar was secret and esoteric. As Guigo, a famous European monk, wrote to the new order in 1129: 'It is useless for us to attack exterior enemies, without having first conquered those of the interior.' The Templars acquired a reputation for secrecy.

But the supporters far outweighed the detractors, both in number and in authority, and so the Order prospered in the west. In the east, however, it was only with the Second Crusade of 1147 that the Knights Templar really came to prominence.

Chapter Four

The Order Prospers

By the middle of the 12th century, Christian control of the Holy Land was looking fragile. In 1147, the German king Conrad III and Louis VII of France, called for a second Crusade to strengthen the Christian kingdoms in the cast. Pope Eugenius III gave the campaign his blessing and Bernard of Clairvaux drummed up support with his preachings.

At the time of the Second Crusade, the Templars of Europe were in a position to send several hundred knights to Outremer. Their expertise at protecting pilgrims now stood them in good stead as they guarded the massive European army moving steadily towards the Holy Land. The Templars won their way into the hearts of the crusade's royal leaders with their military and financial support. And they fought bravely throughout the campaign.

But this Second Crusade was a disaster. The French and Germans suffered heavy losses in their battles with the Turks. By the end of January 1148, the Crusaders were severely weakened and almost out of horses. Louis VII had had enough. He left for home, handing overall responsibility for the campaign to the Templars.

Nevertheless, despite the disasters that occurred during the second crusade, the Europeans survived intact and it was clear that the Templars were there to stay. They were rich in land and won a great deal of territory by conquest. In the desert spaces of the Middle East they established a chain of fortresses. By the 1180s, the Knights Templar had a network of castles to defend against invasion and act as supply depots and waystations. These castles were built to their own special design, and were the strongest in the world. New recruits poured in from Europe to man these strongholds.

They were also the most highly disciplined and organised army of the time and had no difficulty recruiting new men of calibre into the Order. By around 1180, there were as many as 600 knights in the East, along with 2,000 'sergeants' and perhaps 5,000 war-horses. And every battle they fought, however minor, increased their experience.

The Knights were dedicated warriors, toughened by the strict discipline of the monastic ideal. They were not afraid of dying. And to symbolise their willingness

to die as martyrs in defence of the Holy Land, their original simple white vestments were adorned with the now famous red cross.

But the tide of war was turning. In the 1170s, the great Saracen leader Saladin was succeeding in uniting the rival sects of Islam into a single force. Around the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, Saladin held the land of Egypt to the south and effectively also ruled Syria to the north. The years of tolerance between Christian and Moslem in the Middle East were ending. Now it was open war. And it was a war which Saladin was gradually winning. Help from the West was too slow in coming. The inhabitants of Outremer were on their own.

The Moslems themselves also developed their own sect of warrior monks. The Assassins were the Islamic equivalent of the Templars or the Hospitallers. But the Assassins were even more fanatical. As well as taking part in full-scale military operations, they were specialists trained at targeting individuals. The word 'Assassin' is an English form of Hashishiyun, which means 'eaters of hashish'. It is said that their first leader, known as 'The Old Man of the Mountains' used to get them high on the drug and describe visions of paradise, before sending them off on their sinister missions.

The Assassins were fanatically loyal to their masters. Richard the Lionheart's nephew, Henry of Champagne, once visited an Assassin stronghold in Syria in order to negotiate a deal with the Moslems. To impress upon his visitor the absolute obedience of his men, the castle's owner ordered several of his Assassins one by one to leap to their deaths over the castle wall. Henry was said to be visibly shaken by the suicide display.

These Assassin strongholds were scattered throughout the mountains of modern Lebanon and Syria and constituted a constant threat to the north-eastern borders of the Christian kingdom. But the Assassins were also no friends to rival sects within Islam, who were their targets at least as often as Christians.

In 1173, King Amalric I of Jerusalem received a message from The Old Man of the Mountains himself, proposing a peace. Amalric saw that such a treaty would not only secure his borders, but it may also open the schisms within Islam even wider. He agreed to peace with the Assassins.

The Knights Templar had by that time assumed additional roles. Their honesty and integrity were unquestionable. And they were the finest warriors in the land. Both ideal qualities for the secure transport of money round the kingdom. They were, in effect, a medieval armoured security van service. And they were also the perfect tax collectors. No one dared cross a Knight Templar.

Almaric, in his treaty with the Assassins, rashly promised the Templars would immediately stop demanding tax from outposts in Assassin territory. But the Templars did not like anyone making promises on their behalf - even the king. Abdullah, the Assassin agent, was ambushed on the way back from his negotiations with Amalric. He was killed by a lone one-eyed Templar called Walter of Mesnil. Amalric was furious. His well-laid plans for peace with the Assassins had been jeopardised.

This incident serves to illustrate an element of mistrust which began to taint the impeccable reputations of the Templars. They could act independently of the king. This, some argued, was typical of Templar arrogance, adding vague accusations of bribery for good measure. They were highly suspicious of exactly what the Templars got up to behind their cloak of secrecy.

But ultimately Amalric and the other opponents of the Templars had to swallow their anger and tolerate the Knights. They were without question the supreme fighting force in Outremer. Without their battle-hardened military expertise - their fearlessness, their tactical planning and their discipline in battle - the kingdom could never have survived. Without the Templars and the other military Orders, the Christian occupation of the Middle East would quickly have collapsed.

Chapter Five

The Holy Land is Lost

As a fighting machine, the Orders had come to be so feared by their enemy that Saladin, who was unusually merciful towards prisoners-of-war, made a point of executing any Templars and Hospitallers who fell into his hands. He had come to respect the sight of the Templar battle standard - a red eight-pointed cross on a white background. And he had good reason to do so. In 1177, for instance, a force of 300 knights, led by the leper king of Jerusalem, Baldwin IV, routed a massive army of 26,000 Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Sudanese and Mamelukes.

This period of rapid expansion for the Knights finally came to an end with the Battle of Hattin in 1187. Fought out near the Sea of Galilee in modern Israel, this was one of the most dramatic battles in world history. Saladin's army of 60,000 won outright victory against 25,000 Christians. During the two days of the battle, Saladin used the terrain and the climate brilliantly to his advantage. He trapped the Christian forces out in the open, in the blazing heat, in waterless terrain. He set fire to the shrubland upwind so that dense smoke added to their misery and served as cover for his troops. Arrows rained down relentlessly on the pinned Europeans. 230 Knights died in the battle, or were executed immediately afterwards. These executions were a measure of Saladin's respect for the Knights. They would undoubtedly have brought in rich ransoms or even high prices in the slave-markets had he spared their lives.

Within a year, Acre and Jerusalem had fallen. Saladin erased all traces of the Templars by demolishing all their buildings. Soon the only major Christian outpost was the port of Tyre. Though the Third Crusade (1189-92), which brought Richard the Lionheart to the Holy Land, succeeded in recapturing Acre, the Christians never regained Jerusalem. The heart simply went out of the kingdom of Outremer. Acre became the new capital, and the Templars moved their headquarters there.

But when Saladin died in 1193, the rival Islamic sects resumed their squabbling. The Christians fought to win back territory, and their fortunes ebbed and flowed. There were some victories, but there were also some terrible defeats. So many Templars fell at the battle of La Forbie (near Ghaza, in modern Israel) in 1244 that

only thirty-three Knights were left in the whole of Outremer. The end was nigh.

By the middle of the 1250s, a new dynasty had arisen in Egypt. The Mamelukes, former fighting slaves of the Saracens, rose to power under the Sultan Baybars, a man whose cold-hearted barbarism matched that of the first crusaders. Castle after castle, town after town, fell to the Egyptians. The inhabitants fled, and any Templars who survived the battles were beheaded. By 1270, the Templars were no longer a significant military presence in the Holy Land. And in 1291, after the dramatic fall of Acre, the last Europeans left the Middle East.

The remaining Templars escaped with their treasures and religious relics to Cyprus, where they set up their headquarters in Limassol. There they attempted to regroup before confronting the enemy once more in Outremer.

The tide of popular opinion in Europe, however, was to turn against them before they got the chance.

Chapter Six

From Fighters to Financiers

Within a dozen years of the foundation of the Order, the Templars had been given extensive plots of European land. They quickly had to establish an administrative structure to cope with it all. Accordingly, every region of Europe was divided into 'provinces', each with its own Master, and a province was further subdivided into 'baillies'. The job of the Templar houses of Europe was to provide money and goods for the war in the east. One third of all income - in cash - was paid by these European houses to support the war effort.

By the end of the 13th century there were several hundred Templar houses in Europe. The vast majority were in what is now modern France, but there were also strong clusters in Portugal and western Spain, and a fair sprinkling in England and Italy. As many as 9,000 Templar holdings stretched from the Atlantic coast to eastern Poland, and from Scandinavia to Sicily.

Before long the Templars found themselves in an unexpected role. They became the world's first *international bankers*.

Money in those days was gold or silver and was simply worth its own weight, whether it be Arab dinars or Italian solidi. Let's suppose you planned a journey from England to Italy. You would be reluctant to take hard cash with you. This would have been far too risky. But with their network of houses and castles, the Templars could give you a 'note' (the original bank note) as proof that you had deposited a certain amount of money at one of their centres in England. And on presenting this same note at a Templar house in Italy, you could draw that amount of money from there in exchange.

Originally the Templars were less concerned with financial transactions within Europe than between Europe and the Holy Land. They collected taxes in Outremer and ensured such taxes safely reached their destinations. In the 12th century they loaned money to both crusaders and kings. They also acted as agents for ransom payments and the safe transfer of funds to the Holy Land for wars.

By the thirteenth century, the Templars owned a fleet in the Mediterranean. Originally, this was for the transport of pilgrims from Marseilles or La Rochelle to

the Holy Land, but they also transported goods for sale or resale in the Middle East. And on the return journey they might bring slaves or other exotic eastern specialities back to Europe.

The movement of money and the arranging of credit facilities must have grown out of this transport of pilgrims. It was precisely these pilgrims who needed their money safeguarded, and who would have taken advantage of credit arrangements in the Holy Land itself. They were much happier using the Templars for this than any of the rival banking houses that quickly sprang up in competition. The Templars could offer a better all-round service. They could protect you as well as your money. And their vows of poverty made them totally trustworthy.

Kings and nobles all over Europe quickly took advantage of the Templar guarantee of safety and honesty. King Henry II of England deposited many of his valuables with the London Temple - the Templar convent in London, founded in 1185 which still stands today, just off The Strand. In 1204-5 King John even left the Crown Jewels in their safekeeping, as did his successor Henry III in 1261 during the Barons' Revolt. They provided loans - for which interest was charged - to the royal houses. In England, the Crown Jewels themselves were used as collateral to secure one particularly large loan to King Henry.

They were also the Pope's bankers in the Holy Land, and collected taxes on his behalf. In Spain the Order had a virtual monopoly on lending money. In France the Templars were the bankers to the royal family for well over a century, and in England they played a similar role during the reigns of John and Henry III. As England was a particularly rich source of income for the Templars, it is no exaggeration to say that they laid the foundations for London to become the leading international money market that it is today.

In many parts of Europe they were granted exemption from both local and national taxation, from tolls, from arbitrary demands by the local baron or king. It is impossible to put an exact figure on how rich the Templars actually were. But consider the fact that in the middle of the 13th century their income from their English estates alone was £5200 - worth some £8-12 million in today's terms. And remember, that's just from England. The vast majority of their estates were in France and elsewhere on the Continent.

Their involvement in politics was a natural extension of their involvement in the financial affairs of the noble and royal houses of Europe. Since Templar knights tended to come from the upper strata of society, they had a ready-made network of friends and relatives in high places. There are many examples of the influential

roles they played in political events. When King John died in 1216, his son Henry was only nine years old. So, for several years England was run by a committee. This committee included the Master of the Temple, and was chaired by his close personal friend. In 1259, the English Parliament used the London Temple as their meeting-place. And earlier, in 1164, the Templars' Master of England, Richard of Hastings, had attempted to use his influence to reconcile King Henry II with his 'turbulent priest' Thomas á Becket.

Similar stories could be told from elsewhere in Europe. In Aragon (part of modern Spain), when the child king James I came to the throne in 1213, the Aragonese nobles chose the local Master of the Temple to bring the child up in the safety of the Templar castle at Monzón. They remained his advisers throughout his reign.

As well as providing financial and political services in Europe, members of the Order were also always available as crusaders. Though the Holy War in the east had been lost, they played a major part in the on-going wars against the Moors in Spain.

But role of the Templars in the west was always quite different from that in the east. In the west they were farmers, financiers and travel agents. In the cast they were sunburnt, battle-scarred warriors.

Chapter Seven

Guardians of the Sacred Relics

In addition to their estates, their businesses and their rich cash reserves, the Knights Templar were also rich in *relics*.

Relics were the remains of people or things which had featured in the New Testament stories. A popular relic at the time was Wood from the True Cross - the cross on which Jesus had been crucified. Another was the Head of John the Baptist, who was beheaded after he was bewitched by the seductive dancing of Salome. People in the Middle Ages were desperate for relics, which they venerated with awe. But as you might expect, there were plenty of frauds around. Several heads of John the Baptist were in circulation. And there were enough splinters of wood from the 'true cross' to make up any number of crucifixes!

The Templars had in their possession the Crown of Thorns, taken from the head of Christ. They also had the body of the martyred Saint Euphemia of Chalcedon (thought to have divine healing powers). They had a cross made from a bath supposedly used by Jesus, a bronze cross made out of the bowl Jesus had used to wash his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, and a sizeable collection of other relics besides. Popular writer Ian Wilson, in his best-selling book *The Turin Shroud*, made out a case for them having also brought the shroud in which Christ was wrapped in his tomb back from the Holy Land.

But their most treasured relic was the Holy Grail itself - the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. This they were said to have discovered buried beneath the old Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. In the early 13th century, the German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach visited Outremer especially to learn more about the Order. It was true, he claimed. The Templars did indeed own the Holy Grail. This was later corroborated by Trevrizent, who declared: "It is well known to me that many formidable fighting-men dwell at Munsalvaesche with the Gral".

The truths will probably always remain a mystery since all Templar affairs were conducted in secret. Any member of the Order who revealed the proceedings of Templar meetings was punished by expulsion. They were forbidden to keep copies of Templar statutes and the Rule of the Order, in case they should fall into the

wrong hands. Was this no more than an application of the principle that in times of war 'careless talk costs lives'? Or were they guarding some more sinister secrets? Many of their contemporaries believed the latter.

Chapter Eight

The Templars on Trial

It was Friday, 13 October 1307. A fateful day for the Templars and one remembered in superstition to this day as the original unlucky 'Friday the thirteenth'. Late in the evening, agents of the French king Philip IV struck. In a lightning raid, they swooped and arrested Templars throughout the country. The date had been chosen to coincide with visits to France by several leading Templars, including the Grand Master himself, Jacques de Molay. But when the deputies burst into the Paris Temple, the Templar headquarters, they found that all the records and, more importantly for Philip, the treasure had been removed. The deputies also moved to seize the Templar fleet, the largest in Europe, which was moored at La Rochelle. But again, they were frustrated - the fleet had already set sail. To this day, the vast wealth of the Templars has never been found. Nor has it ever been discovered where the fleet sailed to - or where it ended up. But the Templars did not attempt to hide themselves, and by the following morning, several thousand people had been imprisoned.

Strictly speaking, these arrests were illegal. The Templars were subject only to the Pope. But the current Pope, Clement V, owed his position to Philip. The French king, who had moved the seat of the papacy from Rome to Avignon in France, had arranged his appointment. Philip had also most likely masterminded the suspicious deaths of his predecessors, to leave the papal throne vacant for Clement.

Inevitably, the Pope sided with Philip. And with papal support, similar raids on the other Templars were made across Europe. They were all put on trial. Those who confessed to charges brought against them were palmed off with a paltry pension and left to live out their lives in poverty or even as beggars. Any who refused were imprisoned for life. Over 120 were burned at the stake. After the tortures, confessions and executions, Clement V officially abolished the Order of the Knights Templar on 22 March 1312.

The elderly Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was one of those who confessed. But on 14 March 1314, as he was being paraded outside the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris to hear his sentence of life imprisonment, Molay made a dramatic statement:

"I think it only right…" he began, *"That at so solemn a moment I should speak up for the truth. Before heaven and earth, and with all of you here as my witnesses, I admit that I am guilty of the grossest iniquity. But the iniquity is that I have lied in admitting the disgusting charges laid against the Order. I declare that the Order is innocent. Its purity and saintliness are beyond question. I have indeed confessed that the Order is guilty. But I have done so only to save myself from terrible tortures… Life is offered to me, but at the price of infamy. At such a price, life is not worth having."*

As he had publicly retracted his confession, Jacques de Molay, the last of the twenty-two Grand Masters of the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, was burned alive before a jeering mob in Paris. And as he perished, he cursed both the French king and the Pope. He called them to account within a year for their persecution of the Templars. Just over a month later, Pope Clement V died, apparently of natural causes. On 29 November of the same year, Philip IV also died in a riding accident while hunting. Did the Templars then really have occult powers? Was Molay's curse truly effective?

But why did all this happen? What had the Templars done? At their trials, they were charged with heresy - of participating in obscene practices, spitting on the image of Christ and worshipping idols (especially a head called Baphomet). They were accused of sorcery. They were even accused of homosexuality.

In order to understand the reasons for the Templars' fall from grace, we need to go back in time. We have already mentioned accusations of arrogance and greed which rumbled throughout their history. They were founded with a noble purpose - to defend the Holy Land. But the Holy Land had now been lost. They had failed, despite all the expenditure and loss of life - and people resented this. They argued that the Templars were too busy lining their own purses, or squabbling with rival Orders, to maintain a proper defence of the Holy Land. Perhaps they had even been collaborating with the enemy. But this resentment was aimed not just at the Templars, but at the Hospitallers and the Teutonic Knights as well, who were equally 'to blame' for the loss of Outremer.

Then what was so terrible about the Templars, to arouse King Philip's hostility? And this despite the fact that he already had strong connections with the Order. Jacques de Molay was godfather to his son. And when Philip had been faced with a rioting mob in Paris in 1291, the king had chosen the Temple as a place of refuge. They were also his royal bankers.

In the first place, there was their resistance to change. Throughout their history there had been calls for the unification of the Templars and the Hospitallers. The Templars had always objected. But recently the influential writer Ramon Lull had

renewed the call for unification. He envisaged a warrior king riding at the head of the unified orders and driving the Moslems out of Spain and the Holy Land. Philip liked the sound of this. He saw himself as just such a warrior king. He had even suggested to the Pope that the French kings should become hereditary masters of this unified Order, with free access to the surplus income of all the Orders! So, he was no doubt piqued at Templar resistance to unification.

In 1305 Philip had even applied to join the Order. But the Templars soon realised that a man of his overriding ambition would never be content until he had taken it over. They turned down his application, offering no explanation.

They had refused the king! As ruler over a greater and more unified kingdom than any of his predecessors, Philip considered himself to be almost divine. How dare they refuse him!

For the real underlying reason however, we probably need look no further than simple greed. Philip was nearly broke. He had inherited huge debts from his father and from wars against England and Flanders. One of the king's closest advisers, William of Nogaret, suggested the easiest solution to Philip's cash crisis was to confiscate as much of the Templar wealth as he could lay his hands on. The scheming William had already been excommunicated in 1304 for his part in trying to kidnap Pope Boniface VIII. At the time he had merely been carrying out Philip's orders.

King Philip had also come to regard himself as a scourge of heresy and a purifier of the kingdom. In 1306, he had expelled the Jews from France, bringing against them vague accusations of sacrilege and sorcery. If William could supply proof that the Templars were also sorcerous heretics - that their Christian wealth was in danger of pollution - then he could legitimately take it over. Weren't the Templars, after all, notoriously secretive? There was much talk of their 'great secret'. What was it? For them to have amassed so much wealth over two centuries, it must be something powerful - perhaps even occult.

William befriended an embittered renegade Templar named Esquin de Florian of Beziers, who had been expelled from the Order. Esquin had already approached the king of Aragon, offering to sell him the Templars' 'great secret'. At the same time, he had accused them of blasphemy and all kinds of scandalous practices. William lapped all this up. With Esquin's help, he managed to plant spies in Templar houses. The stage was set for the grand arrests. And, as William hoped, for the improvement of the king's finances. But the plan went badly wrong. After all the Templar trials were over, the Pope gave all Templar property which could be recovered not to the French king, but to the Hospitallers!

Chapter Nine

The End of the Order

And so it was that the arrests were made. The authorities in Scotland and Portugal proved reluctant to give up their Templars to the Inquisition. In Scotland, Robert the Bruce had been excommunicated and took no action. But elsewhere hundreds of members of the Order were handed over - mostly, of course, ordinary members rather than knights, since most of the knights were in Cyprus.

Though the account described above paints a plausible picture, it does runs up against one overwhelming problem. If the accusations of heresy and sorcery were only a ploy for the French king to get his hands on Templar treasure, why did the vast majority of those arrested confess to such crimes? Might there be some truth to the charges? Is there ever smoke without fire?

Obviously, the threat of torture will have made people confess against their will. Others would simply follow their leaders. When Jacques de Molay and his high-ranking colleagues confessed, others followed suit. In some cases, the evidence was certainly distorted. We know of one instance where a new initiate was taken into the treasury of a Templar house he was joining. There he saw a golden statue, probably plundered from the Middle East. During his trial, this treasury had become 'a secret vault'. The statue was 'an idol'. And thus, the whole innocent affair suddenly begins to take on a sinister hue.

Nevertheless, a great many confessions remain. We should not assume that many, if any, Templars were actually guilty of many of the charges brought against them: idolatry, homosexuality, and so on. These were the standard charges brought against heretics at the time. And they go against specific elements of the Rule of the Order. But it is still possible that many of the Templars were not orthodox Christians - and these other charges were used in an attempt to lever out the truth. At the time, there were many sects of unorthodox Christianity in Europe. There were the Waldensians, the Spiritual Franciscans, the Brethren of the Free Spirit - plenty of minor splinter groups to worry the Church authorities. Even the occasional false Messiah. It was a time of religious ferment, and it is entirely possible that the Templars might have developed some unorthodox practices

which needed to be kept secret from the official Church.

Perhaps the most notorious sect were the Cathars of southern France, who despised the mainstream Christian Church for its material possessions. The Cathars (the word means 'pure') were ascetics who believed that as well as a *good* God, there is also an evil God ruling the world. These so-called heretics held no allegiance to the Pope. In 1208, one of the Pope's envoys was murdered in Cathar territory. Innocent III ordered a crusade against the Cathars. Some 30,000 troops from Northern Europe swept down on the region and massacred thousands of innocent civilians. 'But how can we tell the heretics from true believers?' asked one soldier as the crusaders entered the town of Beziers. 'Kill them all.' Said the Pope's representative. 'God will recognise his own.' 15,000 townspeople were slaughtered, many in the sanctuary of the church.

There were a great many Templar houses in Provence, the hotbed of Catharism, and it is quite possible they may have become secret enclaves of heresy. There were also rumours that their religious practices incorporated elements of the Islamic religion as a result of their life in the Middle East. This may be the origin of the charge that they worshipped the head they called Baphomet. The word may simply be a corruption of the word Mohammed.

Since no records of their affairs have ever been found, much of the history of the Templars is uncertain. It is often said that they intentionally destroyed their own records lest they ever be used as evidence against them. However, as happens with so many historical documents, it is more likely that their archives were just lost - probably in Cyprus some years later.

But although books and papers may be easy to destroy, whatever became of the Templar treasure? Given their network of influential friends and political allies, the Templars almost certainly were forewarned of the raid. One theory is that they secretly transported their treasures to safety through the sewers of Paris. The complex of catacombs and sewers which run beneath the French capital have never been mapped. But the Templars were reputed to have highly detailed maps of these underground passageways. Once moved to safety, their treasure was transported to an unknown destination on the Templar fleet, and was never seen again.

So where did the fleet go? What happened to their fabulous treasure? And what became of the surviving Templars, particularly in Scotland, England, Ireland and Portugal, where very few of them were handed over to the Inquisition. Or in Spain, Germany, and Cyprus, where they were all found innocent of the charges?

Chapter Ten

The Order Lives On...?

The fate of the Order of the Temple will always be a matter of dispute. What has survived is the Templar legend. In literature and, more recently, in films they are portrayed as heroic Christian warriors fighting against evil and alien forces.

More serious works of history have also perpetuated this Templar legend. As we saw in the last chapter, Jacques de Molay cursed the French king and the Pope shortly before being burnt at the stake. Since his curse was against dictatorial authority figures, it was resurrected at the time of the French Revolution. When the common people rebelled against their aristocratic overlords, they put King Louis XVI to death. This was seen by many as the final fulfilment of Molay's curse. Louis was to be the last king ever to rule over France.

Elsewhere in Europe, where many Templars escaped persecution, the Order adjusted its positions. The Portuguese Templars simply changed their name - like a modern business might change its name in order to avoid previous debts. They became the Knights of Christ, who later became famous for their explorations in Africa and the West Indies. The famous king Henry the Navigator was a known Grand Master of the Order, and explorers like Vasco da Gama were members. Christopher Columbus' father-in-law was a Grand Master, and Columbus sailed across the Atlantic with the familiar Templar cross emblazoned on his sails. The Order of Christ survived until the 1830s.

Similarly in Germany, Spain and other parts of Europe where the Templar purge was less successful, there is plenty of evidence that they just joined other Orders - the Hospitallers or Teutonic Knights in Germany, or one of the local military Orders in Spain.

More mysterious is the fate of the English, Scottish and Irish Templars. A good case can be made - and indeed has been made, by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, in *The Temple and the Lodge* - that a great many of them fled north to Scotland. The Scottish king, Robert Bruce, was especially lenient towards the Templars and never formally dissolved the Scottish Temple at all. He was also in desperate need of skilled knights for his campaigns against the English.

But if Scotland was the final destination of these knights, along with their fleet and possibly their treasure, what became of them? No doubt over the years some of them simply forgot their chivalric past. Others, however, may have helped to found Freemasonry. This semi-secret organisation, which permeates society at all levels today, explicitly acknowledges a lineage stretching back to the Knights Templar. Scotland was one of the main places where a particular kind of Masonry - Templar in its rites and rituals; mystical in its orientation - first arose and flourished.

The Freemasons were not formally founded until the middle of the 17th century. But at the *end* of the 17th century Viscount Dundee was still the Grand Master of the Order of Templars in Scotland. Moreover, at the end of the *sixteenth* century, there were still over 500 locations in Scotland registered as Templar property. It looks as though the Templars and the Hospitallers merged in Scotland. And we know for certain that the Hospitallers survived, because they are still with us today as the Knights of Malta and the St. John's Ambulance Brigade.

Apart from the Freemasons, there is one other mysterious organisation that should be mentioned: the Prieuré de Sion. This French-based cabal is investigated in the explosive best-seller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail.*

The authors claim that this organisation, which undoubtedly exists, has a long history stretching back before the establishment of the Templars. They maintain it was this Prieuré de Sion which originally founded the Templars, as part of its on-going aim to restore an ancient line of French kings known as the Merovingian dynasty. And this dynasty is claimed to have an astonishing lineage. *Its members are said to be descended directly from Jesus Christ himself!*

The book, published in 1982, offered new evidence to make this scenario plausible. This evidence was discovered in ancient documents they discovered in a French library vault which they claimed the authorities tried hard to prevent them finding. It called into question our entire understanding of the life of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament.

Jesus, they claimed, may not have died on the cross at all. Instead, he survived, married Mary Magdalene and the couple had children. And from Jesus' children the Merovingian Kings - and through them a number of other European royal families - were descended.

No less astonishing was a claim that former heads of the Order of Sion included the famous British scientists Robert Boyle and Sir Isaac Newton, French writers Victor Hugo and Jean Cocteau, Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci, and a host of other distinguished Europeans.

Any Templar survival down to our own day would not be as direct as the survival of the Hospitallers. But it is still possible that there are people alive today who are in possession of the Templar heritage and secret traditions. They do not go around in knightly armour. They look no different from anyone else. They may be Masons. Or they may belong to some more esoteric lodge, meeting perhaps once a month to practise magical rituals. Perhaps they are awaiting a time when Christendom again needs defending from an alien threat.

And what of their treasure? Does it still exist somewhere or has it been used up? Was it in fact a real treasure - money and valuables - or was it merely a metaphorical treasure? A 'great secret' of some kind?

Perhaps, if it was real treasure, it has been buried and lost, awaiting accidental discovery by a metal detector. Or perhaps it lies deep in the vaults of a secretive Swiss bank, waiting to be put to use when the time comes.

These are questions which have intrigued both historians and laymen alike for almost 900 years. They are unlikely to be answered. The real truth about the now-legendary Knights Templar will probably remain forever one of life's great mysteries.

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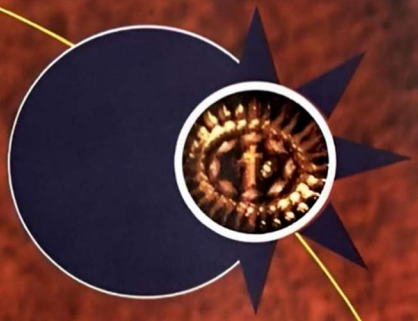

This is the fascinating story of the Knights Templar.

Though it may read like a tale from the Arthurian legends, this story is no fantasy. The Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon-the Knights Templar for short - actually existed. Over a period of 200 years, what began as a 9-man team of well-intentioned noblemen dedicated to defending the Holy Land from the Saracens became the most powerful- and most secretive-organisation in history.

Their story is one of puzzling contrasts. In spite of devout Christian beliefs, they slaughtered men, women and children in the name of God. These warrior monks owned many fabled religious treasures including, it is said, the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus as he perished on the Cross. They were also thought to be the guardians of that most revered of all Christian relics, the Holy Grail.

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